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SOME ABORIGINAL ROCK ENGRAVINGS IN THE ROEBOURNE-HAMERSLEY RANGE AREA

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For many years it has been known that the North-West of Western Australia has many Aboriginal art sites. They are mainly rock engravings (petroglyphs), but paintings (pictographs) are also found, particularly in the gorges and caves near Wittenoom. This account will be confined to a general description of the engravings, and a later article will deal with the paintings.

The best-known engraving sites are at Depueh Island, Port Hedland, and the Abydos-Woodstock Station areas. These sites have attracted numerous investigators including D. S. Davidson, H. E. Petri, C. P. Mountford, F. D. McCarthy, the late Father Worms, and a party from the Western Australian Museum.

In 1960 the Anthropological Society of Western Australia conducted a survey of Aboriginal sites. By means of a circular letter it sought information from all parts of the State, and a list of known sites was compiled. At the beginning of 1963, I was appointed to Roebourne School. I spent part of the term holidays and several weekends in visiting and photographing sites recorded in that list, and was able to add fourteen locations to it. This project took me to nineteen different places where the Aborigines have made their pictures. Photographs and reports have been sent to the Western Australian Museum, where they may be helpful in determining the most fruitful areas for thorough study in the future. The Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies has recently made a grant for petrol and films to enable the survey to be continued during 1964, as many reported sites have not yet been visited.

THE ENGRAVINGS

These pictures have been made in quite a variety of styles. Some are simple line drawings or outlines. The line drawings include overlapping or concentric circles, cryptic markings, meandering lines, bird and mammal tracks, and simple stick figures of humans. The outline pictures at these sites do not have interior lines or decoration like those at Port Hedland and elsewhere on the continent (Fig. 4, no. 12; Fig. 6, nos. 6 and 7). Others are made of pits or dots of varying size and closeness, without any distinct outline (Fig. 3, no. 5).

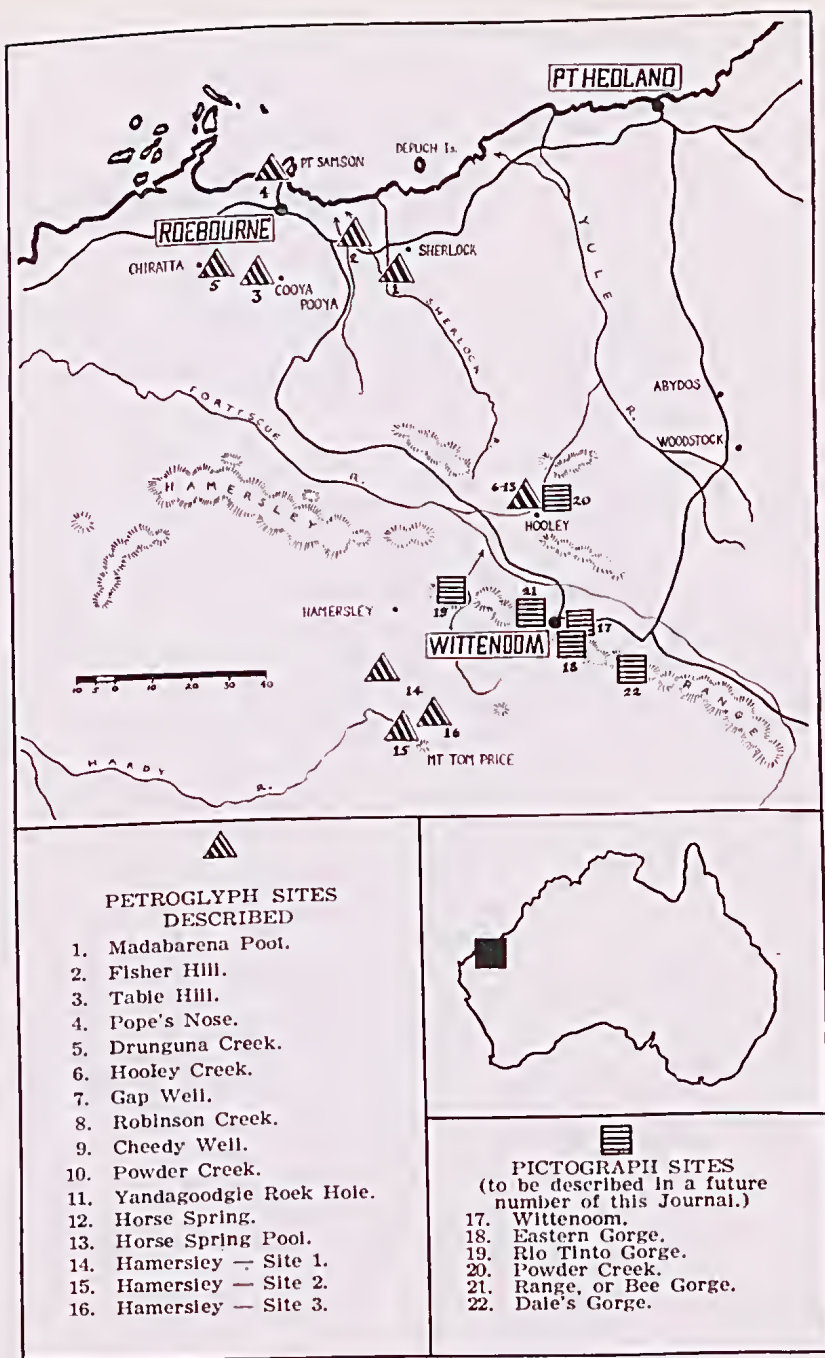


Fig. 1.—Locality Map.

A very large number of those seen are in the fully-pecked, or intaglio, style. These are represented in the figures by blackened areas. Occasionally there are variations or even combinations, such as the dotted turtle with the intaglio head and fore-limbs, and a firm outline (Fig. 2, no. 16). The fully-pecked human and animal figures vary in dimensions from narrow banded bodies not much thicker than stick figures, to those with naturalistic proportions.

ENGRAVING TECHNIQUE

The method of producing these engravings is not known for certain, as rock engraving is not now a living form of art, though painting still flourishes in some parts of Australia. It is not known whether the process was actually observed by early settlers, although J. Withnell (1901: 29), writing of the Roebourne area in 1901, says that the Aborigines first drew the outline in chalk or ochre and then pecked it with a sharp stone. Another possibility is that two stones were used—one as a hammer and the other as a chisel. Possibly the method varied from place to place according to the nature of the rock surface and the material available. For example, coastal limestone like that at Port Hedland is relatively soft, and it has been suggested that certain shells would suffice as cutting tools (McCarthy, 1962: 44). These would not be available, and would be quite ineffectual on the granite and other rocks of the inland galleries.

ANTIQUITY

The pictures are made by removing the dark, weathered outer surface, or patina, and disclosing the lighter rock beneath. The newly-engraved surface is at once subjected to the process of weathering and gradually, through patination, returns to the same colour as the surrounding rock. In this way, the colour of an engraving gives some indication of its age. However, this is not an infallible guide. Colour contrast on most rocks depends on the depth of treatment. The deeper the surface is worked, the greater is the contrast. A lightly-battered and a deeply-incised picture, on the same rock, may show considerable colour difference, and one might judge the clearer one to be the more recent. This is not necessarily so. The shallower picture may have been done at the same time, or even since the deeper and clearer one.

Unfortunately, there is no way of establishing the absolute age of the pictures. The rate of weathering of rock surfaces engraved at the same time varies according to their position. Apparent differences in age can be due to differences in rate of deterioration. All the rocks on the south side of the Madabarena outcrop are a very dark brown, approaching black in colour; while those on the north-east corner are a light red-brown. Some pictures are protected by an overhanging ledge (Fig. 5; Plate 4, no. 1). Others are stained by water trickling over them, and some are completely submerged when the pools are full, as are the lowest ones at Hamersley, Site 1. However, study of the patination is useful sometimes in establishing the relative age of engravings of similar depth on the same rock, or in the same weathering situation.



Fig. 2.—Madābarena Pool, Sherlock Station. (Scale as in Fig. 3.)



Fig. 3.—Drungana Creek, Chiratta Station.

A further guide to the sequence of engravings is the study of the superimposition of one on another. Sometimes the same smooth surface has been used by more than one artist, and pictures showing different styles, subjects and colouration overlap. It is possible in some cases to detect the order in which they were made, and establish the sequence, though not the actual age of each.

A glance at the colour alone, even without the evidence of superimposition, shows that the intaglios belong to the upper, most recent, series. This is demonstrated consistently at all the sites visited. The dotted human and animal figures are in an intermediate position between the intaglios and the simple stick figures, lines, circles and marks of the oldest pictures. In many of the last-mentioned group, all trace of colour contrast has disappeared. The discovery of more sites and the study of the superimpositions will reveal the full number and sequence of art styles. Accurate dating of styles will be assisted by further archaeological work like that done at Devon Downs on the lower Murray River in South Australia, where designs were assigned an estimated date from their association with artifacts and with charcoal. The dating of various engravings could, in turn, be a guide to the development and movement of different myth and ritual complexes.

INTERPRETATION

One of the most interesting aspects of this study is the search for the meaning of these pictures.

Firstly, there is often some difficulty in identifying the various objects. Sometimes it is not clear just what species of mammal, bird, or fish the artist meant to depict. At other times it is even difficult to say, for example, whether a figure is a lizard or a man. Then again, it is often difficult to make any kind of identification at all with confidence. Perhaps readers' comments about the less-obvious figures in the plates could prove of value here.

Secondly, there is the much more important question of interpretation. Why were these pictures, whatever they represent, drawn at all? Though some of the rock art was secret-sacred, and was drawn in secluded places, most of it was in such a position that it would have been seen by anyone. Usually the pictures are abundant by the pools and streams which formed part of ordinary living or camping areas. Polished oval seed-grinding patches are scattered among the pictures, particularly at Hooley Creek, indicating that women and children would have seen them.

Art was an integral part of the traditional life of the Aborigines (cf. Berndt, 1964). Through their dancing, singing, music-making, and their graphic art, they expressed their philosophical and religious ideas and feelings. Some of their pictures illustrate everyday themes, like past or hoped-for successes in hunting. Others are associated with totem increase sites. Then there are those which appear to depict characters from their mythology—creation, ancestral and spirit beings. No doubt, too, they were used as visual aids in the instruction of the young.



Fig 4.—Hooley Station.



Fig. 5.—Yandagoodie Rock Hole, Hooley Station.



Fig. 6.—Site 1, Hamersley Station. (Scale as in Fig. 7.)

It may still be possible to get some of the old men of this district to tell something about the meaning of these pictures, and this is being attempted this year. So far, three Aboriginal informants in Roebourne have attributed the engravings to the Marga People. They believe this to be a race of people, or beings, who inhabited the land before their own Old People. They were like us in most ways, but they were very tall, and they had thin, spindly legs. Unlike the Aborigines, they lived only in caves and in holes in the ground. Some people believe that the Marga People died long ago, but others say that they still live under the ground, and come out of their caves at night. It is for this reason that many Aborigines avoid the hills and gorges of the Hamersley Ranges. The Marga People are said to have depicted themselves in the engravings. A somewhat similar report comes from the Abydos-Woodstock area, where the rock art is attributed to the White Owl Men, or to evil spirits who lived there before the coming of the present Aborigines.

Any further speculation about the significance and meaning of the pictures has been avoided deliberately at this stage, but present indications are that they have lost all ritual significance for living Aborigines, at least in the Roebourne area.

ILLUSTRATIONS

A selection of engravings from seventeen sites on six different stations is shown in the illustrations. A six-inch rule in most of the photographs indicates the size. Because of advanced weathering or unfavourable light conditions, a few engravings were outlined or lightly shaded with white chalk. In these cases, the fact has been indicated in the plates.

Madabarena Pool—Sherlock Station. Fig. 2; Plate 1; Plate 2, nos. 1 and 2.

This station is about 45 miles east of Roebourne on the Port Hedland road. The engravings are on a rocky hill about five miles south-west of the homestead, beside a permanent pool in the bed of the Sherlock River.

When I visited it in August, which is in the dry season, the pool was about half a mile long and 50 yards wide. The hill is about the same length as the pool, running away from one end of it. The main concentrations of pictures are on the north-east corner, the south-east side, and on the low outcrops at the west end. They include some simple stick figures which are very hard to see. Weathering has removed all the colour contrast, which is an outstanding feature of the newer works here. There are several hunting scenes, and many animal and bird tracks, but the striking section of this site is the collection of very clear inverted female figures seen in Plate 1.

These are on the north-east corner. Their bodies have been made, in many cases, by pounding the edge of a rock (Plate 1, no. 4). The limbs are drawn on the adjoining sides. They might be contemporary with the intaglios, the thinness of their bodies being just a feature imposed by their unique rock-edge position. On the other hand, their relatively recent appearance might be due to renovation

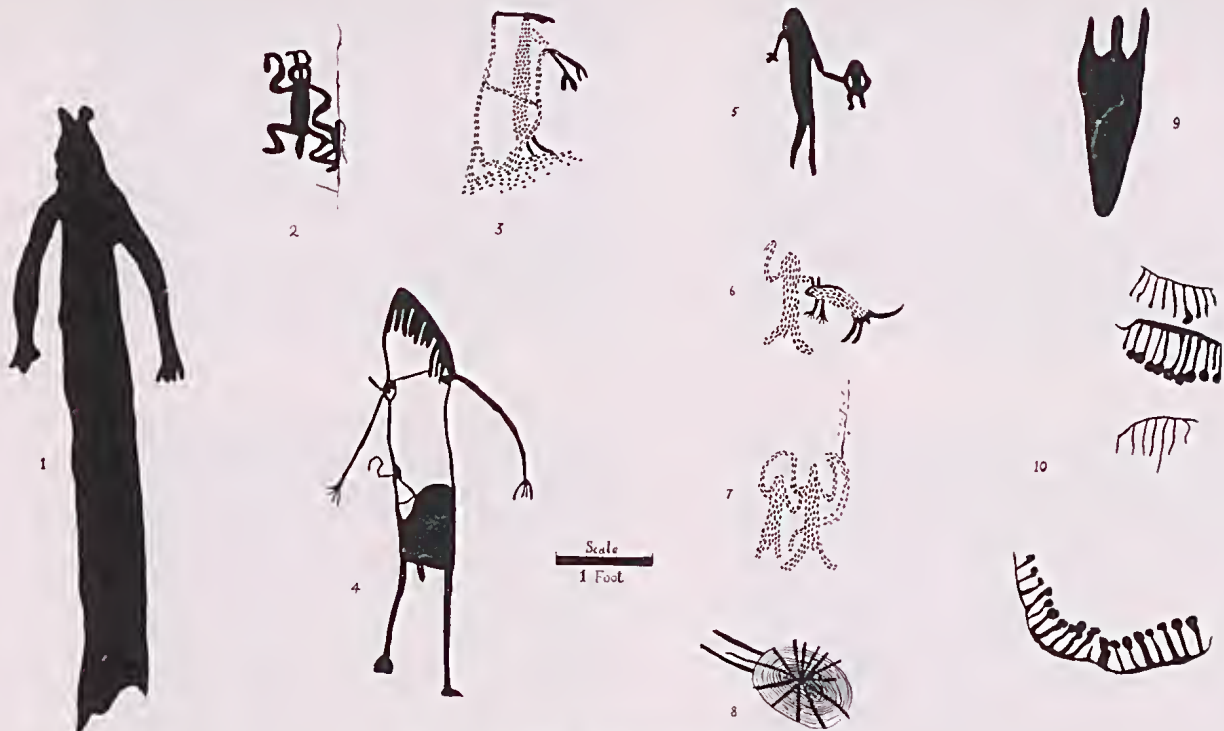


Fig. 7.--Site 2, Hamersley Station.

through some artistic or spiritual motive. The reason for the inverted position is not apparent, but this is seen at other sites, too. There are numerous examples at Woodstock Station on the upper Yule River. An examination of the rocks at Madabarena shows that the inversion is not the result of tumbling from an originally upright position. I have seen upright and inverted figures in the same composition, so the latter position is obviously deliberate.

Photo no. 2 of Plate 2 shows a place where a number of elongated rock slabs have been wedged into vertical positions which suggest a palisade, apparently to indicate a place of special ceremonial importance. There are also conical depressions or pits on this hill, which, even if they are of natural origin, have been elaborated with small stones around the upper rim for some reason. There are similar depressions on Depuch Island, which is 25 miles away (McCarthy, 1961, Fig. 323).

Fisher Hill. Plate 2, nos. 3 and 4.

This is $24\frac{1}{2}$ miles east of Roebourne on the road to Port Hedland. It is an isolated hill of earth and boulders about fifty yards north of the road. The figures on the rocks include men, kangaroos, emus, a fish, and other symbols, the meaning of which is not clear. Most are on isolated rocks, but some form larger tableaux. There is a great deal of difference in the state of preservation of the various pictures here, too.

Fisher Hill is 25 miles from Depuch Island, and, like Madabarena Pool, it is of considerable interest for that reason. A distance of about ten miles separates the two sites. Fisher Hill has a much greater proportion of animal pictures than Madabarena. Although there are some human figures here that could be identified as women, there are none of the large, clear female forms which dominate the latter site. One rock has three pecked discs with holes in the centre. These seem to be the same motif as similar engravings on Depuch Island (McCarthy, 1961, Figs. 326 and 329).

Cooya Pooya Station—Table Hill. Plate 3, no. 4.

The hill is two miles from the homestead, which is some 20 miles south of Roebourne. There are scattered, small pictures on the upper edge of the hill, at the south end. There is a story that, at the end of the last century, an Aboriginal prisoner named Diamond escaped and hid on the hill for nearly two years. The pictures are attributed to him. Some engravings look very much older than others, so that, if he did make any, at least some were there for a very long time before.

The pictures include a speared emu, various tracks, and two simple human figures in coitus.

Pope's Nose Marsh. Plate 3, nos. 1, 2 and 3.

About a mile south-west of Pope's Nose Bridge are three rocky outcrops in the marsh. They are about 200 yards off the Roebourne-Point Samson road, to the west. The locality gets its name from the shape of a rock in the sea near the bridge.



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Plate 1.—Madabarena Pool, Sherlock Station.



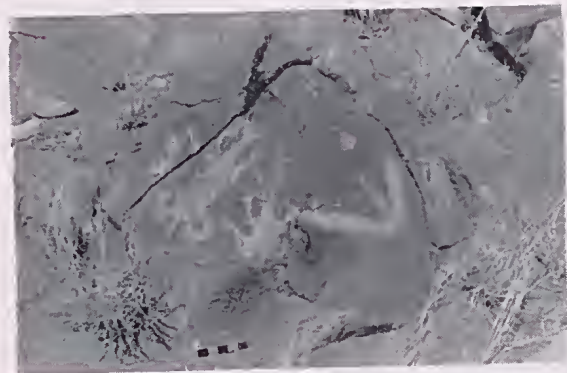
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Plate 2.—Nos. 1 and 2—Madabarena Pool, Sherlock Station. Nos. 3 and 4—Fisher Hill, east of Roebourne.

There are about 30 engravings, but only about a dozen of them are clear enough to be photographed successfully. They include bird and other tracks, a very fine kangaroo or rock wallaby, two human figures, a possible stingray, and some outline animals which are hard to identify. There are several odd lines, or unfinished figures. It is unusual to find incomplete figures. There are many lines in the older drawings, generally, which do not appear to represent anything; but I take these to be symbolic marks, rather than incomplete, realistic figures. At Pope's Nose, however, numerous lines do suggest unfinished works.

Drungana Creek—Chiratta Station. Fig. 3.

This station is about 30 miles S.W. of Rocbourn. The pictures are about five miles east of the homestead at a place where a stream cuts through a low range of tumbled boulders. Most pictures are on the south side of the stream. Here, again, there are earlier, faded and very much simpler stick figures. The larger, more recent intaglio figures include a wider variety of animals than have been seen together at other sites.

There are half a dozen examples of the little animal beside the long lizard (Fig. 3, no. 5). This creature has been seen at other sites, including Woodstock. Some people have commented that this animal looks like an echidna, others suggest a flying fox, and one Aboriginal said it was a fat lizard.

There are other engravings on this station. A group at Yanderic and odd pictures along the creeks, including one described as a perfect eagle, have yet to be investigated.

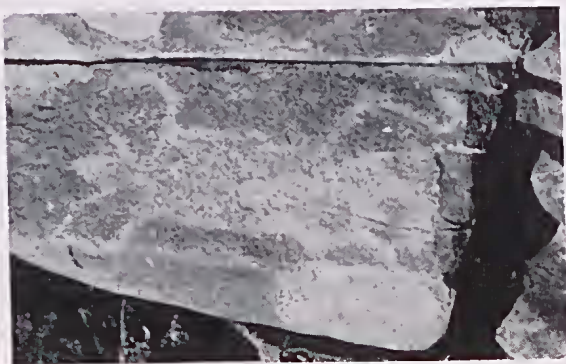
Hooley Station. Figs. 4 and 5; Plate 4.

Davidson and McCarthy both reported sites here, though I do not think they had an opportunity of visiting this station. There is an abundance of sites, but I visited eight of those closest to the homestead, within about a ten-mile radius. These sites are on the creeks forming part of the Fortescue, Yule and Sherlock River systems.

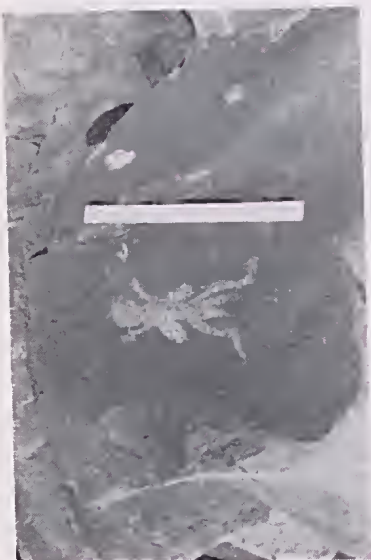
1. Hooley Creek. Fig. 4, nos. 9, 18 and 22.

This site is just downstream from the junction of two water-courses which flow into Hooley Creek. On a treeless, gentle slope above the bed are thousands of boulders, lower than knee-height. Right down in the dry bed and along the sides are larger, though not big, surfaces. A great number of the low rocks have engravings. I estimate that there would be hundreds of separate pictures at the site. Most are small, being restricted in size by the rock size if nothing else.

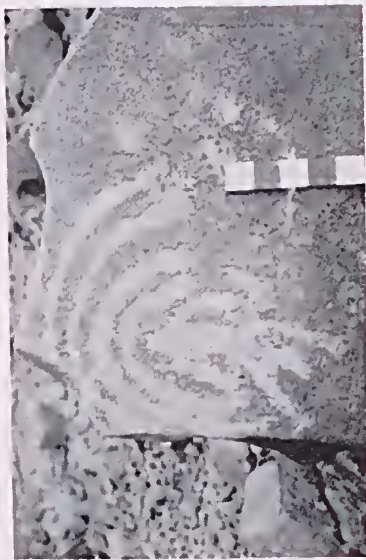
The site could have been a living area, rather than a ceremonial spot, as there appear to be several dozen rocks where grinding has been done. It is in high, open country, commanding a view of distant slopes. There would be distant views of game coming down to drink further up the stream.



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Plate 3.—Nos. 1, 2 and 3—The marsh near Pope's Nose Bridge, Point Samson, No. 4—Table Hill, Cooya Pooya Station.
(Chalk was used in Nos. 2 and 3.)

2. Gap Well. Fig. 4, no. 6.

These are near Gap Well, at a rock hole about half a mile to the north. The well is about five or six miles east-south-east of the homestead. There are about a dozen pictures here, which include humans (Fig. 4, no. 6) and animals.

3. Robinson Creek. Fig. 4, nos. 5, 7, 8, 17 and 21; Plate 4, no. 2.

This site was first reported by D. L. Serventy. It is about a mile east of Gap Well. Most of the pictures here are on the high rock boulders on the west side of the waterhole, which held water when I visited it in November. Some pictures can be seen on the low rocks on the left as one approaches the pool.

It is here that I found the intaglio engraving of a naturalistic reclining woman (Plate 4, no. 2). The remarkable features of this picture include the detail in the hands and feet, fine representation of overlapping legs, the reclining and profile posture, and the pregnant appearance of the abdomen. The rock above the lower half of the picture appears to have been pounded, though not to depict any object of recognisable shape, reminding me of Titian's painting of Danaë and the Golden Shower. Is this engraving, too, a conception scene? Part of a tiny figure, possibly part of the composition, can be seen in the top centre of the photograph.

4. Cheedy Well. Fig. 4, nos. 1, 3 and 12.

This is about five miles north of the homestead. Only half a dozen or so were found here, but they include a large, crouched character (Fig. 4, no. 1), rather like some at Hamersley Station (Plate 5, no. 1).

5. Powder Creek. Fig. 4, nos. 2, 10, 14, 19 and 20; Plate 4, no. 3.

It is a gorge almost at the source of the creek, which runs into the Yule River. This is the largest gallery I visited on this station, and it includes not only engravings, but one fairly well-preserved painted panel to be described in a later article. It is unusual to find paintings and engravings at the same site.

The engravings include several large intaglio compositions, with both human and animal subjects (Fig. 4, no. 14). The identification of the animals shown in Plate 4, no. 3 has given rise to some inconclusive discussion. I have since found several more, though much smaller, examples of the same creatures, on Woodstock.

6. Yandagoodgie Rock Hole. Fig. 4, no. 13; Fig. 5; Plate 4, no. 1.

I am told that this word means "sweet potato" (probably a yam). There are very few engravings here, but they include the very well-preserved, or recent, composition shown in Fig. 5. Many of the female figures at this station have an issue of some kind coming from their genitals. Sometimes it is in the form of blobs or dots, sometimes it is a continuous engraved area, and sometimes there are thread-like lines, from one to three in number. Father Worms (1954: 1,077), speculating on similar thread-like appendages seen at Woodstock, suggested that they might represent umbilical



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Plate 4.—Hooley Station. No. 1—Yandagoodgie Rock Hole. No. 2—Robinson Creek. No. 3—Powder Creek. No. 4—Horse Spring Pool. (Chalk was used in all, for the outlines only.)



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Plate 5.—Hamersley Station. No. 1—Site 1. Nos. 2, 3 and 4—Site 3.
(Chalk was used to outline No. 1).

cords. Women are a predominant motif in the recent pictures at both Hooley and Woodstock, but the styles are by no means identical.

7. **Horse Spring.** Fig. 4, no. 11.

This flows into the Sherlock River. The few engravings here are mostly old and indistinct.

8. **Horse Spring Pool.** Fig. 4, nos. 4, 15 and 16; Plate 4, no. 4.

This rock hole is a mile or two downstream from no. 7. Large rock surfaces are provided by the walls and boulders towering 40 or 50 feet above the water. The lateness of our arrival here did not allow us good conditions for photography, but it was possible to record the remarkable pair of figures in Plate 4, no. 4. The lower figure has its ribs and sternum shown, as in an X-ray. The head, like the woman at Robinson Creek, is rounded and featureless like a Henry Moore sculpture. The squatting position is unusual. Does this position, which is common in burial, and the revealed ribs, indicate that the person is dead? The upper figure seems to be floating horizontally above the other. There is a deep cleft in the top of the head, and the hair or beard hangs vertically down in wavy strands. Two eyes are visible in this one. Both figures have been blackened by water stains, and are visible only through the contrast in light reflection from the rock surfaces of different texture.

As well as the engravings and the paintings, there are on this station many seed-grinding patches with some grinding stones still in place, an increase site for the *Pitandi* or Galah (*Cacutua roseicapilla*), smoke-blackened caves, and stone arrangements.

Hamersley Station. Site 1. Fig. 6: Plate 5, no. 1; Plate 6, nos. 2 and 3.

This is about 21 miles south-south-west of the homestead, at a permanent rock hole known locally as Stinking Pool.

The outline, dotted, and fully-peeked intaglio styles are all present here. Plate 6, no. 3, shows a fine example of a kangaroo hunt with animal and human tracks together and a boomerang arched across the larger animal's neck.

Characters similar to those seen in Plate 5, no. 1, have been observed at many of the inland sites. Some distinguishing features of this type are:—(i) prognathous or canine profile; (ii) long, tapered headdress or hair style; (iii) narrow body; (iv) thin, spindly legs; (v) two-fingered or forked hands, and similar feet; (vi) more than half have a stooped posture, though this is not a position imposed by the rock area available; (vii) in nearly all cases seen they are clearly men.

I see in these figures a resemblance to the Gallery Hill (Woodstock) engravings which Father Worms (1954: 1,082) identified as the "guranara" (gurangara) petroglyphs. Perhaps these particular characters in the rock art are responsible for the beliefs about the Marga People. Two Roebourne Aboriginal informants have identified a photograph of an example at Gallery Hill as a Marga. It is not clear yet whether these engravings gave rise to the myth, or whether they illustrate a myth shared by the artists and the living Aborigines.



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Plate 6.—Hamersley Station. No. 1—Site 3. Nos. 2 and 3—Site 1. No. 4—Site 2. (Chalk was used in Nos. 2, 3 and 4.)

Hamersley Station. Site 2. Fig. 7; Plate 6, no. 4.

These pictures are at a place some seven miles from Mt. Tom Price on the Boolgeeda Road. At this position, three creeks can be seen coming down from a plateau about a mile away to the north. The central one contains the engravings along a series of rock holes, which held water in August. The stream on the right of the centre one was searched, but no more were found there.

An interesting motif not seen before is the web-like picture (Fig. 7, no. 8), observed also at the next site. This is not a large site, but it is of interest because of the unusual way of portraying the anthropomorphic types illustrated.

Hamersley Station. Site 1. Fig. 6: Plate 5, no. 1; Plate 6, nos. 2 and 3.

This is about thirteen miles S.E. of Boomana* Spring, at a permanent rock hole. It is referred to in the Museum's list of sites as Sheet 13 (Onslow), No. 8. There is no road beyond the spring, so even in a 4-wheel drive vehicle it is very difficult to reach.

There are some very fine, clear intaglios here, including two large compositions of unusual figures. There are some large examples of the figure with the dog-like profile, described at Site 1 (Plate 5, no. 2).

The animals include three very clear lizards, and some less distinct kangaroos and emus, with a few of their tracks. The anthropomorphic figures, though, far outnumber the others.

An examination of the photos showed two examples of superimposition which were not noticed at the time of the visit. In both cases the lower engraving is a bulky outline human figure with short, erect, hair. The eyes have been indicated, too. This is, generally, not a common feature.

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* "Bunginah" Spring on Lands and Surveys Dept. map; "Broomana" Spring in Museum's list.